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South Korea's Presidential Election: A Difficult Road to Transition [redacted] (b)(3)

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Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

03 December 1987

South Korea's Presidential Election:
A Difficult Road to Transition (b)(3)

Summary

The more open political groundrules in South Korea have produced a heated national leadership race with high stakes for the contenders and other key actors. The ruling party and the military face the real possibility of losing power and perhaps the loss of financial and personal security as well. The opposition has its first chance to gain the presidency in 16 years. For their part, radicals will confront a major political setback if the transition is peaceful. (b)(3)

In our view, an election widely viewed in South Korea as legitimate is necessary but not sufficient to bring about a smooth transfer of power. A clear mandate for the winner also is an important factor. On both counts we see reason for concern:

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(b)(3) This memorandum was prepared by Office of East Asian Analysis (b)(1)
Information available as (b)(3)
of 03 December was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and (b)(6)
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[redacted]

- The opposition already is poised to cry foul if Roh wins whatever the evidence of cheating. [redacted] (b)(1)

[redacted]

- With no sign that any of the four major candidates will drop out, the odds favor a plurality winner. [redacted] (b)(3)

The behavior of the Army and the radicals--both potential roadblocks to a smooth transfer of power--for now appears less worrisome than had been expected only a few months ago. The Army seems inclined to stay on the sidelines during the election, and the radicals have failed to muster support. [redacted] (b)(3)

We believe Koreans could initially accept Roh as President even if he won by a slim plurality, as long as the ruling party was perceived by Koreans as having refrained from wholesale cheating. Nonetheless, Roh would need to show progress on his promises of political reform in order to maintain the upper hand and prevent a resurgence in protests. [redacted] (b)(3)

[redacted] a win by either Kim Young Sam or Kim Dae Jung would carry more legitimacy. But an opposition-led government would face challenges from senior military officers who would see weaknesses or other shortcomings through the prism of national security. [redacted] (b)(1) (b)(3)

In any event, the transition is only the first of several hurdles the government will face. The president must guide the ruling party and the opposition to agreement on a new national assembly election law, hold parliamentary elections before April, and manage what is expected to be a more diverse and competitive legislative body. At the same time, he will continue to face pressures from the right and left, with military leaders anxious to protect themselves, and their share of the pie, and radical dissidents still committed to revolutionary change. [redacted] (b)(3)

The Election and Political Reform

After 25 years of rule by military-dominated governments, South Korean voters will have their first opportunity since 1971 to vote in a direct election for president when they go to the polls on 16 December. The foundation for the contest and for a democratic transfer of power was laid in June. Massive demonstrations then protesting President Chun Doo Hwan's earlier abandonment of his commitment to revise the Constitution led ruling party presidential candidate Roh Tae Woo to promise major steps

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toward political reform (see inset). A national referendum in October overwhelmingly endorsed an interparty agreement establishing a new Constitution with direct election procedures.[1] (b)(3)

In a political environment dramatically different even from that of six months ago, three main contenders are challenging Roh in a heated race. Two opposition leaders--the former presidential candidate Kim Dae Jung, and his rival Kim Young Sam--are vying for power. On the right, former Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil, who returned from exile earlier this year, is competing directly with Roh for conservative votes (b)(1)

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The new ground rules create high stakes for the contenders and other potentially critical actors in the process:

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- Aside from the possibility of losing power, the ruling party faces the threat of legal, financial, and personal reprisals from an opposition victor.

- As the de facto foundation of the ruling camp, the military almost certainly is worried that an opposition victory could bring a purge of its ranks as well as a loss of financial and social status. (b)(1) (b)(3)

- With their first chance at power in 16 years, opposition leaders must consider the consequences of a loss Defeat would undermine their longstanding claim that only government duplicity and a political process stacked in the ruling camp's favor have kept them from office. (b)(1)

- For radical activists--intermittently powerful catalysts of change--a credible election would be a major setback. Before June, many leftists undoubtedly counted on popular repudiation of Roh's succession under the old Constitution to fuel support for revolutionary change. (b)(3)

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[1] The previous, indirect presidential election system called for an electoral college of over 5,000 delegates to select the president. The process was heavily stacked in the government's favor making a victory for the ruling party inevitable. (b)(1) (b)(3)

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The Path to Direct Presidential Elections

February 1985	Opposition campaigns for National Assembly elections on platform demanding direct presidential election system...wins surprisingly large minority of seats.
February March 1986	Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam launch signature campaign to press Chun to agree to revise Constitution and adopt direct elections...after obtaining over 1 million signatures, Kims begin street demonstrations...emboldened by "people power" in the Philippines that deposes President Marcos.
May 1986	Continuing protests prompt Chun to establish interparty committee in parliament to consider changing Constitution.
April 1987	After year of political brinksmanship that prevents parties from making progress on constitutional revision, Chun announces election will be held in December under existing electoral college system... [redacted] most South Koreans see move as proof Chun plans to manage the election and hand off to a chosen successor. (b)(1)
June 1987	Chun endorses Roh Tae Woo candidacy and ruling party confirms Roh at national convention...demands for direct presidential elections mount, leading to widespread demonstrations...to defuse unrest Roh proposes dramatic reforms, including direct presidential election.
July 1987	Chun blesses Roh's proposal...groundwork for negotiations between the parties begins.
September 1987	Ruling and opposition parties agree on draft constitutional amendment establishing direct elections and changes in presidential election law.
October 1987	New system is approved in nearly unanimous National Assembly vote...gains overwhelming public approval in national referendum.

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Keys to a Stable Transition

In our view, **an election outcome widely regarded as legitimate** is the most critical factor for a stable transfer of power. Most Koreans expect campaign improprieties on both sides, and (b)(1) (b)(3)

Nonetheless, the onus for ensuring a fair contest clearly rests with the government. Heavy handed tactics--such as strong-arming voters, coercing or manipulating the military vote, or stuffing the ballot boxes--would undermine the credibility of a Roh victory. In the worst case, an obviously fraudulent election could provoke a public outcry at least as intense as the June protests. (b)(3)

A winner with a clear popular mandate also would help ensure stability. A solid win--for example, one that approached a simple majority--would undercut those who are prepared to cry "foul," as well as deter military officers who might consider an extralegal challenge to an opposition victor. Indeed, (b)(1) (b)(3)

public opinion remains a determining factor in the military's view of its political options. (b)(3)

The behavior of both the Army and the radicals--always South Korea's potential spoilers on the right and left, respectively--is crucial to a successful transition. Military leaders remain intimately involved in the electoral process. As practical helpmates to the ruling camp, they control the indoctrination, if not the votes, of their troops, Beyond that, the (b)(1) military is a ratifier of the election outcome, with the option to overturn the results. The radicals occupy a similar niche within the opposition camp. As an organized force, they can turn out supporters; as potentially disruptive challengers to the establishment, they can polarize the political scene, precipitate a crackdown, and derail the electoral process. (b)(3)

The Election: Out of the Starting Blocks (b)(1) (b)(3)

public comments by Koreans generally underscore the fact that many in the ruling party, the opposition, and the military are sensitive to popular expectations for a fair election. (b)(1)

politicians of all stripes recognize the risks of domestic unrest (b)(3) and international censure--for example, the damage that could be inflicted on South Korea's prestige and the dangers posed to a successful hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics--if the political process is disrupted. Even so, the competitive pressures and the prospect of defeat will loom larger as the ruling and opposition parties approach the end of a heated contest. As the race enters the home stretch, we see several danger signs. (b)(3)

The ruling party does not appear well organized, unified behind its

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candidate, or confident that it can win. According to a variety of reports, the Democratic Justice Party remains split between moderates who support Roh and his reform initiatives and hardliners who remain loyal to Chun. Criticism of Roh for lifting the lid on dissent--and for depriving the ruling party of a presidential election system that guaranteed victory--also continues to surface, suggesting that, despite the campaign, the conservatives have yet to pull together as a party, much less as a political team. [redacted] (b)(3)

The effects of these divisions are likely to become more worrisome as election day approaches. [redacted]

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No matter how far the ruling party goes--a decision that is likely to come at the last minute, when an opposition victory appears imminent--all three of Roh's major rivals are preparing to contest the outcome. Both Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam have publicly denounced ruling party election spending. (b)(1) (b)(3)

The issue of a clear mandate also promises to be troublesome. With four major contenders and four minor candidates in the field, we see the odds strongly favoring a plurality, rather than a majority winner. The main development that could change this outlook is a compromise between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam that would produce one opposition challenger. Both recognize one opposition competitor would wage a far more effective campaign:

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the opposition would probably win a fair contest if only one of the Kims ran a majority of Koreans disapprove of the Kims' dual candidacies. (b)(1) (b)(3)

- The dual candidacy of the two Kims also may well deprive them of political backers over the longer run. their younger faction members are annoyed that the Kims are putting personal ambitions ahead of a commitment to beat Roh. This could produce defections after the election if Roh wins. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

We doubt the atmosphere between now and 16 December will offer many opportunities for reconciliation between the two Kims. Antipathy between their supporters has already been evident in several scuffles during the campaign, suggesting that strong pressure for accommodation is unlikely from below. Moreover, distrust between the two men runs deep: Kim Dae Jung outmaneuvered Kim Young Sam in 1971 for the opposition's presidential nomination, and at this point neither is likely to turn to the other to look after his political fortunes. (b)(3)

Given military leaders' potential roles as spoilers, their actions and those of radical dissidents ironically have proved less worrisome than those of the ruling party and the opposition. (b)(1) (b)(3)

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The radical movement, the main catalyst that could change the military's attitude, in our view, has been unsuccessful in winning broad popular support. Since Roh's reform proposals won widespread backing in June, radical organizers have failed to enlist student, labor, and other sympathizers. efforts to snatch ballot boxes during the October plebiscite on the new Constitution were roundly criticized in the press. Similiar disruptive tactics to undercut Roh's campaign by instigating egg and bomb throwing incidents also have backfired winning Roh some sympathy, if not support. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

We believe the splits in radical ranks over strategy in the election period will undermine the radicals' ability to derail the campaign. the radical leadership is divided, but several groups already have shifted gears to concentrate on the postelection period. many groups are focused on organizing new members, rather than preparing violent tactics to avoid alienating potential backers who support the election process. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

Outlook

With several weeks left before the election and shifts likely in voter attitudes as well as in the behavior of the four competitors themselves, it is too early to pinpoint the factors that will make or break the candidates' fates.[3] Given the current signs that a winner will only gain a plurality of the vote, the public perception of the election's legitimacy will be central to how events unfold after 16 December:

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[3] For a closer look at factors that will influence voting patterns see DI Intelligence Assessment EA-87-10051 November 1987, South Korea's Move Toward Democracy: A New Look at the Electorate. (b)(3) (b)(3)

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- We believe Koreans could initially accept a Roh victory, even by a slim plurality, as long as the ruling party refrained from wholesale election cheating. Roh almost certainly would win a measure of tolerance, if not an initial "honeymoon" period, for successfully keeping the political process on track. He already has gained respect for his bold reform steps in June, and many Koreans give him high marks for his ability to run the country and maintain stability, according to a variety of reports. But, he would need to show progress in fulfilling his promises of political reform in order to maintain the upper hand, prevent a resurgence in protests, and avoid the pervasive unpopularity that plagued the Chun government.

- victory would carry a strong measure of legitimacy to most Koreans. Depending on the policies tabled by a new administration in Seoul, however, the opposition's lack of governing experience could emerge rapidly as an issue and perhaps as a political danger point. While a Kim Dae Jung or a Kim Young Sam also would enjoy a "honeymoon" period of sorts, the opposition has already advanced proposals for broadbrush social, economic, and political reform that are certain to put either man under pressure to demonstrate quick results. (b)(1) (b)(3)

Even with legitimacy initially on his side, the new president will face potential challenges from a watchful military and radical element, each with a potentially disruptive agenda. Indeed, both the military and the radicals pose the greatest threat to stability after the election, in our judgment. (b)(1)

If an opposition president-elect indicates he will retaliate against the military for real or alleged past transgressions, the odds favoring intervention will rise considerably:

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Indeed, a weak or ineffective opposition-led government--no matter how legitimate the election outcome--would face risks from senior military officers who are likely to see its failings through the prism of national security. (b)(3)

In addition, a variety of reports indicate that the radicals see the postelection period as their best chance to foment unrest. They reportedly expect election impropriety by the government, followed by opposition cries of foul play, to allow them to tap widespread popular dissatisfaction. They also almost certainly hope many on campus--historically their main recruiting ground--will be disillusioned, enabling them to expand their ranks and press new challenges on the government. (b)(3)

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Even if the military establishment remains on the sidelines and radical activity is ineffectual, the new president will have to cope with a wide range of political challenges as he consolidates his control. Given South Korea's postwar history of dictatorial executives, one-party rule, and neutered legislatures, the nuts and bolts of governing in the wake of a major step toward democratization would be a serious test for the new government. [redacted] (b)(3)

As president-elect with defacto power, Roh or one of the Kims will immediately need to lead the government and opposition to agree on a National Assembly election law. With legislative elections required under the new Constitution by April 1988, success in that effort will be an immediate measure of his skills--and a scorecard on his leadership. Similarly, the election for the National Assembly will provide voters their first chance to pass judgment on the new government. [redacted] (b)(3)

Most political observers agree that a new electoral system to choose the legislature will produce a more diverse and competitive body.[4] The odds do not favor legislative cooperation and efficiency, with the possibility of a president without clear control of the executive on the one hand and no tradition of political compromise in Korea on the other hand. Indeed, we have few reasons to expect pressures or confrontational tactics by losing opposition politicians to abate.

[redacted] (b)(1) (b)(3)

In our judgment, South Korea's initial crises in 1988 could well occur because of relatively mundane matters--for example, the passage of routine legislation such as the budget--rather than because of battles over major national policy issues. A new leader also will face the demands to deliver on campaign promises--such as higher wages--from constituents emboldened by the success of street demonstrations in June. And old pressures, such as those from big business, anxious to ensure that its interests are served, and from the military, seeking to protect its status and share of the budgetary pie, will be no less significant in 1988. [redacted] (b)(3)

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[4] The current National Assembly election law strongly favors the ruling party, providing it with a solid majority if it wins only 25 percent of the vote. [redacted] (b)(3)

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